
PERCEIVED PARENT-CHILD INTERACTION AND BOYS' SELF-ESTEEM IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The problem under consideration in the present paper deals with the relationship between parent-child interaction patterns and the child self-esteem in a private high school in the city of Lagos, Nigeria. The relationship between these variables is examined. It is hoped that a cross-cultural investigation of the effects of parent-child interaction on the child's self-esteem will enable us to make a more precise statement about the nature of this relationship. The hypotheses dealing with parental support and child's self-esteem was strongly supported by the data.

Perceived Parent-Child Interaction and Boys' Self-Esteem in Nigeria

Symbolic Interaction theory in sociology offers perhaps the most extensive explanation of the relationship between social factors (interaction patterns) and the development of the self. In the tradition of Mead (1934) and Cooley (1902) the self is defined as a symbolic construct and explained in terms of the reflected appraisals of others. In coining the concept "looking-glass self," Cooley emphasized the reflective nature of the self, that is, one's social reference is determined by his imagination of how he appears in the minds of others. Sullivan (1967, p.9) defined the self as an organization of conceptions and perceptions whose primary purpose is to decrease anxiety which results from the disapproval of others. Rodgers (1971, p.26), from a psychiatric

perspective, suggested that it is the child's experience of others' awareness and reaction to him which is responsible for the differentiation of his experience into "that which he is" and "that which others are." Thus, through evaluational interaction with others, the individual forms an organized pattern of perceptions about his own nature, perceptions of both negative and positive value.

It seems reasonable to expect that parents are among the most important significant others for the child and consequently have a substantial influence on the development of the child's self-system. Parents are the first objects of the child's affection. He is dependent on them for the satisfaction of his most basic needs. The interaction between parents and child comes early, is constant and is intimate. It is logical, therefore, that the parents' evaluation of the child, as perceived by the child, will have a great influence on his self-esteem.

There has been enough research supporting the direct relationship between social interaction and self-esteem that at least the notion has a high degree of credibility. Research on the effect of parent-child interaction patterns on the child's self-esteem is much scantier but points in the same direction. Helper (1978, p.193) collected data on self-evaluations of 74 8th and 9th graders in Illinois. Also he gathered data on the parental evaluations of the child directly from one or both of the parents. Correlations between self-acceptance and acceptance by the parent indicated a similarity between parents' evaluation of their child and the child's self-evaluations.

Jourard and Remy (1995, p.365), using a sample of 99 undergraduate Emory University students, found that self-appraisals covary with a person's perception of his parents' appraisals of him. Furthermore, negative self-appraisals and perceived negative parental appraisals of the student's self were related to psychological insecurity.

Perhaps the most relevant study in this area is that by Rosenberg (1985) on parental interest and children's self-conceptions. His key independent variable was parental interest in the child, which he used as an indicator of parental evaluation. His subjects consisted of high school juniors and seniors selected from a stratified random sample of ten high schools in New York state. Rosenberg's findings are quite impressive. In all three areas of parental interest investigated, the data consistently show that parental indifference is associated with lower self-esteem in the child. Also, students who reported only punitive responses tended to have lower self-esteem than those who reported only supportive responses, but students who reported indifferent responses had lower self-esteem than either of these groups. These findings support the basic Meadian hypothesis that the self reflects the attitudes of significant others.

A number of investigators have maintained that the sex of the parent and the sex of the child are important factors which need to be considered on assessing the effect of parent-child interaction on the development of the child's self. Douvan and Gold (1986, pp.471-473) in a review of the literature concluded that sex-role identity is likely to be central to an individual's total self-conception. The family emotional relationships are different for sons than for daughters. And the effect of mother is different from that of father on the child's self-esteem. Empirical support for these notions is offered by Droppleman and Schaefer (1983, pp.650-654) and Bronfenbrenner (1981, pp.91-98).

Droppleman and Schaefer (1983) investigated the difference between boys' and girls' reports of parental behavior. They administered a parent behavior inventory to 85 male and 80 female students in a Catholic High School. The items comprised the components of parental nurturance and control. Mothers were reported significantly higher in nurturance than fathers by both boys and girls, and both reported the opposite sex parent as more "autonomy granting" than the parent of the same sex.

Also, Bronfenbrenner (1981) examined the influence of sex differences on parent-child interaction in a sample of 400 New York tenth graders. His findings suggest that within the family, boys and girls are in somewhat contrasting situations. Girls receive more affection, attention, and praise than boys, whereas boys are subjected to greater discipline, mainly from their fathers. Also, he found that a child is given more support by the parent of the opposite sex.

Levine, Klein and Owen (1967), Levine, Levine and Marvin (1970) and Levine, Dixon, Richman, Keefer, and Leiderman (1996) in their study of father-child relationship and changing lifestyle in Nigeria found evidence of change toward a more intimate and affectionate father-child relationship oriented towards the raising of fewer, more self-directed children. The movement is towards greater permissiveness towards the child's spontaneous desires (his aggression, his occupational choice, etc.), greater egalitarianism in husband-wife relations. This shift has taken place in the context of a general decline in social distance between the father and his wife and children. Traditionally, this social distance was related to sex segregation in the compound and increased with the number of wives; its sharp diminution, under changed conditions has made husband-wife relations more egalitarian, given more paternal attention to the child, and made the amount of this attention dependent not on the internal structure of the family but on the amount of time the father's extra familial roles allow him to spend with his family.

Also, Marvin and Levine (1977) found in their study of parent-child attachment in Nigeria, that the quantity and quality of father-child interaction have an impact on the child's acquisition of behavioral dispositions such as achievement motivation, authoritarianism, sex identity and the tendency to turn aggression towards others.

The loosening of traditional constraints among the Nigerians accompanied as it is by the persistence of some traditional respect and discipline was found to produce fewer disciplinary problems than the modernization of child rearing in other parts of the world (Levine, Klein, and Owen, 1967, pp.54-55).

Taking these considerations dealing with sex differences into account, the effect of parental evaluation on the child's self-esteem in Nigeria will be examined separately for each parent. However, since the present report deals only with a male sample of adolescents, the findings can only be generalized to boys.

Hypotheses

In the present study, evaluations of the child by significant others (parent) will not be directly measured. However, the dimension of parental support is an indirect measure of parental appraisals of the child and should be similarly reflected in the child's self-esteem. The following hypotheses were tested:

- (1) Parental support is positively related to the child's self-esteem.
- (2) Father's support is more strongly related to the child's (boy's) self-esteem than is mother's support.

If the propositions of symbolic interaction theory dealing with the self are true (they are usually stated in universalistic terms), they should be true for social contexts other than the United States. Unfortunately, the author has found out that comparative research on these variables is practically non-existent.

One of the main objectives of the present study is to examine the relationship between parent-child interaction and the child's self-esteem on a different cultural context which is Nigeria. It is expected that the hypotheses stated above will hold for Nigeria.

Methodology

Sample: The subjects for the study are 220 high school boys selected from a private high school in Lagos, Nigeria. The average age of the respondents is 15 years. Questionnaires were administered to the students in a group setting, either a classroom or an auditorium. The samples' parent's age is 43, parent's education (\bar{x} = 14 years). A greater proportion of the fathers of the students are in the upper-middle and middle class occupations ("technical or professional" and "proprietor or official"). Almost no lower class respondents were found for the sample.

Measures: The independent variable, parental support, is measured by items taken from the instrument developed by Bronfenbrenner et al, which has been called the Bronfenbrenner Parent Behavior Questionnaire (BPB) (Rodgers, 1966, pp.4-5). The BPB requires that the child answer questions about how his parents act toward him. The theoretical importance of the child's perception of his parents' behavior for understanding personality development has been emphasized by a number of investigators. Garnezy, Clarke, and Stockner (1981, pp. 179-182) claimed that it is the subject who interprets the interaction between himself and his parents and for him it is his own definition of the situation that is most significant. Helper (1978, p.193) note that parental behavior effects the child's ego development only to the extent and in the form in which he perceives it.

The short form of the BPB was designed to measure the three most important explanatory factors emerging out of the earlier work of the Cornell group. The factors are called "support," "control," and "punishment" and each is measured by the sum of four items. Only the "support" factor of the BPB will be considered on this paper. The following four items are the indices for this variable:

- (1) If I have any kind of a problem, I can count on her/him to help me out.
- (2) She/he says nice things about me.
- (3) She/he teaches me things I want to learn.
- (4) She/he makes me feel she/he is there if I need her/him.

The student was asked to respond to these items, both for his mother and father, on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from "never" to "very often."

The reliability estimates, or average inter-item correlations, for the support factor are .73 for father and .69 for mother, and the correlation between parents is .55 (Rodgers 1966, p.5). In addition to these average inter-item correlations of the Cornell group, test-retest stability correlation coefficients were obtained for a group of 29 girls. The mean item stability coefficient was .67 for the mother and .71 for the father.

The dependent variable, self-evaluation of the child, was measured by items from Osgood's (1972, 1974) Semantic Differential. The "evaluation" factor was composed of three sets of adjectives: (1)friendly-unfriendly, (2)happy-sad, and (3)good-bad. The subject was asked to respond to these pairs of opposites on a five-point scale ranging from one of the adjectives to the other. The factor loadings for these items for Osgood's American sample are .88, .91, and .93 respectively. A test-retest reliability coefficient was computed for the same sample of 29 girls. The mean stability coefficient for the three self-evaluation items was $r = .55$.

Results

The results are presented in Tables 1 through 3. For each of these tables, the variables self-evaluation and parental support have been trichotomized. The reason for trichotomizing rather than dichotomizing the variables was to retain as much

information from the data as possible. That is, the trichotomized variable would permit a curvilinear relationship to show up, whereas this would be washed out if the variables were simply dichotomized. Furthermore, since the sample size is fairly large, there was little chance of having the cell frequencies too small to run χ^2 test. Cut-off points for the values of each variable were determined by the frequency distribution for that variable. That is, cut-offs were made with an eye to equal frequencies for each of the three categories. The danger of using this procedure for establishing cut-off points is that it allows for intra-sample comparisons at the expense of inter-sample comparisons. However, since in the present study the frequency distributions for these variables are similar for the sample, the latter disadvantage is minimized.

The relationship between parental support and self-evaluation for the Lagos sample is presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Parental Support and Child's Self-Evaluation

| Self Evaluation | Parental Support | | |
|--------------------|------------------|------------|------------|
| | Low | Medium | High |
| High | 15% | 18% | 47% |
| Medium | 44% | 49% | 35% |
| Low | <u>41%</u> | <u>33%</u> | <u>18%</u> |
| Total | 34% | 51% | 72% |

$\chi^2 = 18.831$ $P < .001$
Gamma = .429

There seems to be a positive linear relationship between parental support and self-evaluation. 47% of the high support subjects had high self-esteem, compared to 18% and 15% for medium and low support subjects respectively. 49% of those classified as medium support also had medium self-esteem. However, the highest category for low support was medium self-esteem (44%), and not low self-esteem as expected. However, the latter came

in a close second with 41%. The coefficient of association was relatively high, $G = .43$.

In the next two tables parental support is differentiated into father support and mother support.

TABLE 2
Father Support and Child's Self-Evaluation

| Self Evaluation | Father's Support | | |
|--------------------|------------------|------------|------------|
| | Low | Medium | High |
| High | 13% | 37% | 41% |
| Medium | 42% | 42% | 41% |
| Low | <u>46%</u> | <u>22%</u> | <u>18%</u> |
| Total | 48% | 60% | 49% |

$\chi^2 = 15.473$ $P < .005$
Gamma = .378

Table 2 shows the relationship between self-evaluation and father support for the Lagos sample. It shows an equal proportion of these high on father support were high and medium on self-esteem (41% for both cells). The highest cell frequency for medium support was medium self-evaluation (42%), and for low support it was low self-evaluation (45%). However, the differences between the frequencies in these cells wasn't that great, even though they went in the expected directions. Nevertheless, the χ^2 value was significant at the .005 level, and Gamma = .378.

The third table examines the relationship between mother support and self-evaluation.

TABLE 3
Mother Support and Child's Self-Evaluation

| Self Evaluation | Mother's Support | | |
|--------------------|------------------|--------|------|
| | Low | Medium | High |
| High | 13% | 19% | 44% |
| Medium | 52% | 49% | 33% |
| Low | 36% | 32% | 23% |
| Total | 31% | 60% | 79% |

$\chi^2 = 14.488$ $P < .01$
Gamma = .348

The relationship between mother support and self-evaluation is not as strong for the sample. The table shows that 44% of the high support cases were also high on self-esteem and 49% of the medium supports were medium on self-esteem. For the low supports, however, the most common category of self-esteem was not low, as expected, but medium (52% and 36% for medium and low self-esteem respectively). X^2 was significant at the .01 level, and Gamma was equal to .348.

For a measure of the degree of difference between the association of father support and child's self-esteem and that of mother support and child's self-esteem, the Gamma coefficients for these relationships in Tables 2 and 3 can be compared. For the sample Gamma = .378 for father support and .348 for mother support and child's self-esteem.

Discussion

The hypotheses dealing with parental support and child's self-esteem was strongly supported by the data from Lagos. The significance level for these relationships was .01 and the degree of association (Gamma) between these variables range from .348 to .429. The differences between the degree of association of father support and child's self-esteem and that of mother support and child's self-esteem are not very large but are in the

hypothesized direction; father support is more strongly associated with child's self-esteem than is mother support.

There is a possibility that class was operating as a confounding variable on the relationship between parental support and the child's self-esteem. To check for this possibility, correlation coefficients were obtained for social class, measured by father's occupation and mother's and father's education, and parental support, and also between self-esteem and social class. There was very little or no relationship found between the dependent variable, self-esteem, and any of the indicators of social class. The correlation coefficient ranged from -.05 to .14. The association was a little stronger between social class and the independent variables (mother support, father support and parental support), but these were quite low also. They ranged from .04 to .29. On the basis of these correlation coefficients, I feel that it is safe to assume that the relationship between parental support and the child's self-esteem is not spurious because of the effects of social class.

It may be premature to generalize the relationships between parental evaluation, father evaluation, and mother evaluation, and boy's self-esteem found in this study to all human societies and all social conditions. Nevertheless, finding this similar a set of relationships to exist in a developing economy like Nigeria gives empirical weight to some of the general symbolic interaction notions concerning the development of the self.

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